

# REVIEWS OF BOOKS

## AMENTIA

Berry, Richard, J. A., M.D., F.R.C.S., F.R.S.E., and Gordon, R. G., M.D., D.Sc., F.R.C.P.E. *The Mental Defective. A Problem in Social Inefficiency.* London, 1931. Kegan Paul. Pp. xi+196. Price 8s. 6d.

THE purpose of this book is to instruct the public; it is therefore written very simply, with a good deal of reiteration and dogmatism. The authors have, no doubt wisely, refrained in what is essentially propaganda from any discussion of controversial scientific points; the complexity of the problems is glossed over in favour of a confident assertion of general principles. The tone is authoritative and assured, and the previously uninformed reader is for the most part unaware of the qualifications or varied findings which would have to be put forward in a more precise work. But that is not to say that there is any lack of controversial statement. Indeed, apart from the central mass of elementary physiology and pathology above referred to, the book is written in a vehement, very earnest, provocative style. A lively sense of the present social danger from mental defect, and conviction as to the best methods for dealing with this are evidently the chief motives for the writing of the book.

There is an introductory chapter in which the range of the problem is made clear in its medical, legal, and social aspects. Then come chapters on the development of the brain, on its minute structure and its relation to mental activity. An outline of the morbid variations in defectives and of the kinds and degrees of mental defect is associated with a discursus upon heredity. The chapter on "The Relationship of Mental Defect to other forms of illness" is one of the least happy in the book—it is said, for example, that the hopelessly ill-adjusted psychasthenic is one "in whose case the lack of psychological synthesis would seem to be due to a deficiency in neurons, which

are not properly joined up into the complex chains necessary to subserve continuous practical activity. In such cases we are dealing with the type of mental defective who lacks the capacity for making a social and environmental adjustment. . . ." Such statements are unfortunate.

The social consequences of mental deficiency are described in Chapter VII in general terms. It is a pity that the authors have not set forth the broad statistical grounds for their assertions, for many of their readers would probably be more impressed by such data than by assurances that the observations "are based on solid scientific fact and evidence." The intelligent public is bewildered by the notorious discord between experts in this field and, uncertain as to the exact points of disagreement, is unwilling to accept anything merely on authority. It is therefore to be regretted that such accepted and common ground as that covered in this chapter should be presented *ex cathedra*, rather than with the reinforcement of clear evidence. However this may be, of the present position and its dangers there is a forcible picture in which the possible detriment to the nation, the problems of housing, drug addiction, vagrancy, crime, and prostitution are adverted to in their relation to defect. Finally, a policy is outlined which should mitigate these evils, either actual or feared. Early recognition of defect, and education of public opinion so that emphasis shall be laid on the chances of social adaptation, must be the first desideratum, it is pointed out; the second is that the defective child shall be trained only along lines suited to his defect. Then the authors discuss the institutions in which defectives are segregated, and advocate model colonies, run at small cost, with adequate facilities for occupation, training, and expert observation. As to the elimination of mental deficiency, there is a brief statement "without comment," concerning euthanasia and sterilization.

There can be little doubt that the book will serve the purpose at which the authors have aimed—to arouse and instruct public opinion.

A. J. LEWIS.

## THE BIRTH RATE

**Fisher, R. A., Sc.D., F.R.S.** *The Social Selection of Human Fertility*. Oxford, 1932. Clarendon Press. Pp. 32. Price 2s.

IN the Herbert Spencer Lecture for 1932 Dr. Fisher ingeniously resolves the distinction generally drawn between the natural and the social sciences by showing that the basic law of causation at work is precisely the same in both. Measurement in the social sciences is essentially statistical in character: we can predict how a social system will behave only in so far as its properties are the total of a large number of independent items of behaviour. Just so Boltzmann's statement of the second law of thermodynamics makes probability one of the central concepts of physical reality: the behaviour of a gas can be calculated because its ultimate components are very numerous and largely independent.

The author goes on to point out that prediction in the social sciences is rendered more difficult by organization and by public opinion, both of which limit the independence of behaviour of individuals. On the other hand, chance has perfect play in the hereditary endowment which parents pass on to their children. Many millions of different genotypes are probably capable of being produced by the mating of two persons and the resulting type is absolutely beyond social control. Society can, however, influence the selection of parents and so indirectly, but no less effectively, control the hereditary endowment of the future. The incidence of parenthood, moreover, is closely linked with the process of social promotion, where, again, individual reactions are manifold and independent, and thus have the effect of segregating different sorts of men into different occupations with the inevitability of natural law. Social promotion

determines the intermarriage of different families, and so perpetuates the differences produced by the selection for occupational status. But the conditions which determine promotion are also subject to social control, and reward over a large part of the field bears some proportion to what is counted as social service.

Granted that society can control both the selection of parents and the conditions which determine social promotion, when we come to ask how far society is in fact exercising control, the answer is not reassuring. In Sir Arthur Salter's *Recovery* the suggestion is made that in the sphere of finance and industry we have lost many of the benefits of the old economic system of unregulated competition because we were rightly unwilling to accept some of its social consequences, but that we have not yet advanced to the stage where we can secure the full advantages of planned direction. Is not the same true in the sphere of sociology? In days gone by, social promotion came chiefly, as Dr. Fisher points out, to those gifted with independence and initiative, skill, prudence, and sound judgment. These qualities still count, though the State has stepped in to correct certain defects in the competitive system. We are unwilling, and rightly unwilling, that any who are born should suffer want or should die if that can be prevented. We have also tried by free education, national insurance, etc., to equalize opportunities. Action generally has been taken which has tended to favour the poorest classes in the community as compared with the rest, to lower their death rate, to increase their fertility rate and their chances of promotion in life. On the other hand, the scales are weighted against those who have to pay for such social advantages as education, and this has led to the limitation of births in this class. Dr. Fisher estimates that in that part of the population with incomes of £300 a year or more the current supply of children is not sufficient to replace more than one-half the parental generation, so that a full half of whatever eugenic value that class contains is already lost.